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## Monsoon that has darkened Tolleson is finally gone

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For four long years, a dark and treacherous monsoon has hung over the sturdy shoulders of Tolleson, threatening this land-locked, six-square-mile working-class community largely of Hispanic residents in the Southwest Valley.

Which alignment for the western leg of the South Mountain Freeway would the Arizona Department of Transportation prefer?

The hotly debated question posed a palpable concern not only for the economic future of Tolleson and, to a lesser extent, neighboring Avondale, but for Phoenix and other Southwest Valley communities.

They all got their wish last week when ADOT spared Tolleson and Avondale and selected a South Mountain Freeway alignment along 55th Avenue in Phoenix, which for more than 20 years had planned for this selection by limiting development in the area.

It was a good choice, the best alternative that recognizes traffic flows, is less expensive by more than a half-billion dollars, has fewer sociological impacts, fewer displacements of residences and is consistent with regional planning.

What was first a line on a map in 1985 was resoundingly ratified in an open and deliberative process.

Tolleson Mayor Adolfo Gamez called it "a great day" because the city's future "was in the balance." He admitted that the thought of having a city divided in two and displacing all kinds of businesses "was scary."

Indeed it was. Had the 99th Avenue alternative been selected, it would have been the virtual end of Tolleson's ability to generate sales tax revenues to finance city services. That's because the route would have gobbled up 95 acres that Tolleson was counting on for an economic corridor and forced the demolition of a mall, currently under construction, to build a mammoth interchange.

The potential was so dire that City Manager Reyes Medrano said, "We are trying to defend our city."

There's a perception that the Loop 101 hookup with Interstate 10 at 99th Avenue would have been a better link from a traffic standpoint. In isolation, that may be true.

But it is not true when the South Mountain Freeway is analyzed as part of a regional system that will include the I-10 reliever - a parallel freeway about six miles south of I-10 that'll run from the South Mountain Freeway westward to the planned Loop 303 and beyond to Arizona 85 - Loop 303 along the Cotton Lane alignment and a widened I-10. These freeways will work together, better distributing the traffic.

While the contentiousness over the western leg is over, not so with the eastern leg. Issues affecting the Pecos Road alignment aren't resolved because some homeowners in Ahwatukee are adamantly opposed. Also still a possibility is a route across the Gila River reservation. The tribe has said in the past that it doesn't want the freeway on its lands, but tribal members still are talking. And lingering on the

sideline is a no-build alternative.

ADOT hopes to have everything sorted out in an environmental impact statement by the end of 2007.

Let's hope there are no delays because the quicker ground can be broken on the South Mountain Freeway, the faster congestion relief will occur.

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